

An Unexpected Word

chapter excerpted from Mike's first draft of his next book

At the outset it's important to recall that we're still dealing with the issue of who was with God before anything was created. In the last chapter we looked at Wisdom, God's "co-creator" or special agent of creation. We saw how Wisdom was a deity figure and identified as Jesus in the New Testament. In this chapter we'll meet the second member of the Jewish godhead again, albeit by a different name (and yes, I said *Jewish*).

If you caught the play on words (or on the Word!) that closed the last chapter, you have an idea as to what our subject will be in this chapter. If you've been a Christian for any amount of time you have probably heard a sermon or Bible study lesson from John 1:1-3, 14, where John identifies the "Word" (the Greek word for "word" is "Logos") as the one who became flesh and lived with them—Jesus. That kind of talk can be confusing. How does a person become known as the "Word"? I'm hoping to shed some light on this for you and, as always, take you down a few unfamiliar but exciting roads.

It probably won't surprise you that I'm not going to start with John 1, even though that's the famous "Jesus is the Word" chapter. That would be too predictable and formulaic. My habit of starting with the Old Testament is something to get used to—I want to show how all these ideas started with Israel's Bible before there even was a New Testament. For those of you who may have done some reading about Jesus as the Logos before, it *may* surprise you that I'm going to disagree with the consensus view that John got this idea from Greek philosophers who talked about the Logos as the "reason principle" that governed the world.¹ I don't think John's idea of the Word (Logos) had much to do with pagan Greeks. I think John got it from his Old Testament and Jewish teachings about the Old Testament in the synagogues of his day.

The phrase "the word of the Lord came to me" or something similar is very common in the Old Testament. That often happened to prophets who were getting tuned by God aurally to deliver some message to a typically unreceptive audience. There are occasions when it means more, though—when it's actually describing a *person or entity*. So, in what follows, I don't mean to say that when you see this phrase or one like it that it always or even mostly refers to some sort of divine person. I only mean to say that sort of thing does happen, and I believe it's fundamental to what John had in mind when he wrote the first chapter of his gospel. Let's take a look at some examples.

Genesis 15 is a fairly familiar passage to many Christians, at least in terms of the basic flow of events. In that chapter God repeats his promise to Abraham from Genesis 12 that the patriarch will have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. *But is God alone* when he makes this promise? Check it out and watch for the underlining:

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2 But

Abram said, “O Lord God [Hebrew, *adonai-Yahweh*] what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” 4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” 5 And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” 6 And he believed the Lord [Hebrew, *Yahweh*] and he counted it to him as righteousness.

This is a fascinating text. Notice right from the start that it is the WORD of the Lord who comes to Abram *in a vision*. This is no mere voice or auditory sensation. The Word here is something that can be *seen*—else why call it a *vision*? Abram recognizes this Word or being as the Lord (Yahweh) and speaks to him as such. Now, since Abram is in a conversation with God, we might be tempted to say that the phrase “the word of the Lord came to him” in verse four is just a sound in his ear and no other person is visibly there. Verse five makes it clear that we are interpreting verse one correctly—that there is a person there with Abraham: “And *he* [the Word / Yahweh] *brought him outside* and said ...” A *sound* does not *bring* a person outside; another person does. My thinking here is that this text does not have two deity figures in it at one time, but rather that here we have another case of Yahweh appearing in visible form to Abraham, this time referred to as the Word. Incidentally, have you ever wondered how, in Genesis 18, where we read point-blank that Yahweh visits Abraham as a human (or in a human body since he ate with Abraham), Abraham *recognized* Yahweh in that episode? My guess is that he had seen him before, here in Genesis 15.ⁱⁱ

The most powerful evidence that Genesis 15 is describing a visible person referred to as the “Word” comes from the New Testament—and from Jesus, the Word, himself. In John 8:56, the Incarnate Word tells his Jewish antagonists that he appeared to Abraham prior to his incarnation: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” The Jews object to this claim, whereupon Jesus utters his famous statement, “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).ⁱⁱⁱ My point here is that only one passage in the Old Testament makes sense of this claim by Jesus, the Logos, the Word—Genesis 15:1, where “the Word of the Lord appeared to Abraham in a vision” as the visible, personal manifestation of Yahweh. I hope you grasp the significance of this interchange. Since the Word is clearly *equated* and *identified* as Yahweh in Genesis 15, when the New Testament has Jesus saying “that was me,” he is claiming *to be* Yahweh in visible form. He is the Word of the Old Testament, who was the visible Yahweh.^{iv}

Returning to the Old Testament, an episode similar to that of Genesis 15 transpired in the life of Samuel when he was a boy. I Samuel 3 is another familiar Bible story that we often read through too quickly. Little Samuel keeps hearing *a voice* calling for him while he’s trying to sleep, but there’s more to it than that. The voice is the Word of God:

1 Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.
2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. 3 The lamp of God had not yet

gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. 4 Then the Lord called Samuel, and he said, “Here I am!” 5 and ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. 6 And the Lord called again, “Samuel!” and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. 8 And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the young man. 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.’ ” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 And the Lord came and stood, calling as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant hears.” . . . 19 And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. 21 And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

I hope you’re as amazed as I was the first time I saw this passage in this light. As with Genesis 15, the first verse of this passage makes a clear association between the *Word* of the Lord and a *visionary* experience—not a mere auditory event. The Word was rare because visions were rare. Notice at the end of the chapter the fact that we are talking about the Word as a being who was seen is absolutely nailed down. The Lord (Yahweh) “appeared *again*” at Shiloh, the place where the tabernacle (“temple”) was located before Solomon’s temple was built. And Yahweh “*revealed himself*”—again the language of sight—*by the Word* of the Lord. Notice as well that once Eli figures out what’s going on and instructs Samuel on how to respond, the Word came *again* and “stood” before Samuel. Voices do not stand! Persons do. God appears once again in physical form and is referred to as the Word.

Our last example from the Hebrew Old Testament is perhaps even more explicit, and takes the Old Testament beyond the visual realm. In Jeremiah 1, the call of the prophet, we read:

1 The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, 2 to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. 3 It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month. 4 Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” 6 Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! [Hebrew, *adonai-Yahweh*] Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” 7 But the Lord [Yahweh] said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord.” 9 Then the Lord

[Yahweh] put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord [Yahweh] said to me, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.”

It is quite clear from the first eight verses in this chapter that the prophet is conversing with Yahweh, who in verse 4 is referred to as “the Word.” We could easily take this as Jeremiah speaking to the air or responding to something only in his ear. But then comes verse nine, where the Word *reaches out* and *touches* Jeremiah. Sounds don’t physically touch people. Physical persons touch people. In Jeremiah 1 the Word—pardon my borrowing from John 1:14—is made flesh and does something only a physical entity can do.

In the last chapter I made a point of demonstrating that the understanding of Wisdom as a deity figure was something that wasn’t made up by Christians as a sort of self-styled manipulation of the Old Testament for their own purposes. That view was shared by Jewish writers well before the New Testament was ever written. The same is true for the idea that the “Word” was a physical manifestation of Yahweh. That belief was actually very common in the Judaism that flourished in Palestine well before Jesus was born. What this means for us in this book is that John had to look no further than his own Jewish traditions for his doctrine of the Word as a manifestation of Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. What we find in the New Testament demonstrates continuity of the concepts, along with further development. The point is that both pre-Christian Jews and Christian Jews looked back at their Hebrew Old Testament and saw a “binitarian” godhead in certain passages. How can I be so sure? All one needs to do is look back at the Jewish writings before Jesus founded the Church.

To understand what follows we’re going to have to learn two new terms. You already know that “Logos” is the Greek word for “word,” and that Logos is the term John uses in the first four verses of his gospel to describe Jesus as being with God and also being God (“In the beginning was the Word [Logos], and the Word [Logos] was with God, and the Word [Logos] was God”). If you’ve seen Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ* (or at least heard of it—and who hasn’t?), you know that the Jews of Jesus’ day didn’t speak Greek as a habit, though many of them knew it. The language they spoke was Aramaic. Aramaic was the language Jews adopted while they were in Babylon for seventy years as exiles. After being Babylon for so many years, many Jews actually began to lose the knowledge of Hebrew. The situation required translating the Old Testament into Aramaic so Jewish people could read their Bible! These translations were known as *Targums*.

The word for “word” in Aramaic is *memra*. That means in the passages we looked at a few paragraphs ago, instead of talking about the Logos of God or the “Word” of the Lord, we’d be talking about the “*Memra* of the Lord” coming to people. It just so happens that in the Targums—those Aramaic translations of the Old Testament the Jews of Jesus’ day were used to reading as their Bible—the *Memra* of God as a manifestation of God or as a “second God” shows up in *many* places.

The *Memra* actually became a well-known character in the Old Testament for Jewish readers of the Aramaic Bible. Throughout the Aramaic Bible, the *Memra* is introduced or “used” in passages where it looked like there was more than one Yahweh in a passage, or where there was a second god figure who seemed to be interchanged with Yahweh. Let that sink in: *Jews* who went to synagogue before Jesus’s day were

reading a Bible that had the Word—the *Memra*—as a deity figure in addition to the God of Israel. *Jews* knew that “the *Memra* was God” before John ever wrote.

For example—and this one is curious in Hebrew and English—take a look at Genesis 19:24, which describes the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah:

Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven.

Kind of odd, isn't it? *The Lord* (Yahweh in Hebrew) is the one raining fire out of heaven *from the Lord* (Yahweh). It really looks like there are two Yahwehs here! My view is that's the case, in a manner of speaking. There is the invisible Yahweh, God the Father who is spirit. The other is the visible Yahweh that appeared to Abraham in Genesis 15 as the Word, who later appeared to him again to share a meal and speak to him about these wicked cities. As I will argue in this book at length, Yahweh in flesh or manifest as a visible person is Yahweh *the Son*, the second person of a *Jewish godhead*. The other was Yahweh in heaven, the Father. Amazingly, the Targum picked up on this and “solved” the odd wording of Genesis 19:24 by inserting the *Memra* into the verse. Here is how the Targum renders Genesis 19:24:^v

Then the Memra of the Lord [Yahweh] rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven.

Not surprisingly, if you look in the Targum at Genesis 18, my thunder in this chapter was stolen centuries ago by the ancient Jewish scribe. Where the Hebrew Bible says Yahweh appeared to Abraham (Gen 18:1), the Targum says, "The Memra of the Lord [Yahweh] appeared to Abraham."

In Genesis 15, the passage we looked at above where the Word of the Lord comes to Abram in a vision, the Aramaic Targum captures the point I made very clearly. Look back at that verse briefly. After the Word appears to Abram in a vision and promises the patriarch offspring, Abraham puts his faith in the Lord (Yahweh) in Genesis 15:6—perhaps the most famous verse for salvation by faith in the Old Testament. The Aramaic Targum reading is remarkable:

And Abraham trusted in the Memra of the Lord [Yahweh], and He counted it to him for righteousness.

In a later conversation between Abraham and Yahweh that hearkens back to Genesis 15 and the covenant the Lord made with Abraham, the Targum has the covenant being made with the *Memra*, the Word, just as I argued above in Genesis 15.

Genesis 17:7 - And I will establish my covenant between my Memra and between you.

If we venture outside passages that are unconnected to the covenant with Abraham and God's meetings with Abraham, the presence of the *Memra* is even more amazing. It's hard to believe that Bibles like these were used in the synagogues—and when we realize this, it becomes quite clear that John's claim that the Word was God was not unprecedented to Jews. Consider some of these other verses from the Targum:

Genesis 1:3 – the first creative act of God:

And the Memra of the Lord [Yahweh] said, “Let there be light,” and there was light by his Memra.”

Genesis 1:27 – the Creation of humankind (recall the plural verbs in verse 26 – let us make humankind in our image”):

And the Memra of the Lord [Yahweh] created man in His likeness, in the likeness of the presence of the Lord He created him, the male and his yoke-fellow He created them.

Genesis 3:8 – God comes to Adam and Eve “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” after they have eaten the forbidden fruit):

And they heard the voice of the Memra of the Lord [Yahweh] walking . . .

Genesis 28:20 – This verse records Jacob's vow, "If God will be with me ... then Yahweh will be my God."

"If the Memra of the Lord will be my help... the Memra of the Lord shall be my God."

Exodus 3:14 – Moses’ burning bush experience (we haven’t gotten to this yet, but God is not the only one in the bush; notice how the Memra speaks as though he is Yahweh):

And the Memra of the Lord said to Moses: "I am He who said unto the world 'Be!' and it was: and who in the future shall say to it 'Be!' and it shall be." And He said: "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: 'I Am' has sent me to you."

Exodus 17:21 – The flight from Egypt where God is in the pillar of the cloud / fire leading Israel out of Egypt:

And the Memra of the Lord [Yahweh] was leading them during the day in a pillar of cloud.

I could go on and on with similar examples. While it would be fun (for me anyway) to go through the intricacies of the Greek grammar of John 1:1-3 to demonstrate that John’s intent was to point to the pre-existence and deity of Christ as the Logos (Word),^{vi} it’s much easier to just do what we’ve done here. The idea of a second deity figure, referred to as the Word, is quite Jewish, and quite biblical. Moreover, the identification of that second being with Yahweh is unmistakable.

Before we leave this chapter it is important for the reader to recall my comments in the previous chapter about whether Wisdom was created (had a point of origin, before which he did not exist) or begotten (brought forth or introduced, but already existing). It should be clear by now that Jesus is identified with both Wisdom and the Word. It should also be clear that the Word is identified as Yahweh. Genesis 15, I

Samuel 3, and Jeremiah 1 the being who is the word is referenced repeatedly as Yahweh. The Word is the visible Yahweh.

This produces simple yet telling questions: If the Word is the visible Yahweh, how can the Word be a created being? How can Yahweh in any sense be created? How can Yahweh be uncreated, and yet his “visibleness” be created? Does Yahweh create himself? These conundrums evaporate if one opts for “begotten” instead of “created.” That is, “begotten” has explanatory power for *the whole picture* of what many Jews and the Christians who wrote the New Testament believed about the godhead: There is one God, but that one God brought forth (“begot”) from himself a second being or person to act as his special agent. This second person is the visible manifestation of Yahweh. I say “brought forth from himself [Yahweh]” because (a) there are passages where this second person is referred to as Yahweh, and Yahweh was neither created or creator of himself, and (b) where both Yahweh and this person are mentioned or described in the same passage and distinguished as two separate persons.

Lastly, New Testament writers merge the Word and Wisdom by means of Jesus. It stands to reason that if the Word is Yahweh, who cannot be created, then it is most coherent to understand Proverb 8 as saying that Wisdom was begotten, not created. The apostle John himself suggests as much by his own identification of the Logos with Wisdom in John 1:18:^{vi}

No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

Where’s the equation? It’s the phrasing that has the “only begotten God” (Greek, *monogenes*, the same word as in John 3:16) is *at the Father’s side*. This is the same imagery as in Proverbs 8:30, where Wisdom says of God, “*I was beside him*, like a master workman.” Furthermore, the Greek words behind the phrase “at the Father’s side” is literally “in the bosom of the father.” The idea of “being in or at the bosom” occurs elsewhere in the New Testament and the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) for reclining next to someone while eating (John 13:23; people ate while reclining in first century Jewish culture)

Congratulations on surviving two chapters! It’s mind-stretching stuff, but we’re actually just getting warmed up! I hope while you catch your theological breath you’re also catching on to what I said in the Introduction. You’ll never look at your Bible the same way again—there’s just so much under the surface. No, God wasn’t alone in the beginning. He had his co-ruler / co-creator / special agent right there with him, Wisdom / the Word . . . but there were still others.

ⁱ See Appendix ___ for a detailed discussion of scholarly views of the Logos.

ⁱⁱ Although it is true that the divine name Yahweh never comes from Abraham’s mouth in this chapter (he uses the generic “lord” [adonay] instead of Yahweh), Genesis 18:25 suggests strongly that Abraham knew who he was talking to was Yahweh. After *twice* saying “far be it from you” he refers to him as “the Judge of all the earth.”

ⁱⁱⁱ When Jesus says “I am” (instead of the expected, “I was”), he is taking for himself the name of God revealed to Moses in Exodus 3 at the burning bush incident. There God said his name was “I am” (Exo. 3:14).

^{iv} By the way, this triangulation of John 8:56 and Genesis 15:1ff. is what Paul was referencing in Galatians 3:8, where he says that the gospel—that God would justify the Gentile nations—was preached to Abraham. Christ, the Word, came to Abraham and told him that through him the other nations would be blessed (cf. Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-6). Paul sees this as speaking of the Gentiles being brought into God's family ("sons of God") through Christ's work on the cross.

^v The reader can check all these references (if he or she can read Aramaic) at the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon Project online at <http://call.cn.huc.edu/>.

^{vi} See Appendix __ for the details on the Greek of John 1:1-3.

^{vii} There are differences in Greek New Testament manuscripts for John 1:18, but they all accord with the same point for which I am arguing.